FOR DISCUSSION ONLY

Working Group on Progression & Completion Measures

Draft Report

January 27, 2011

Note: The charter of the U.S. Department of Education's Committee on Measures of Student Success (Committee) provides for working groups to assist the Committee in carrying out its duties. The working groups are responsible for developing materials to be provided to the entire Committee for full deliberation and discussion during its meetings. This draft document has been prepared by a Committee working group. This document does not represent the final recommendations of the Committee. The information and opinions included are the products of working group discussions and do not necessarily represent the views of the entire Committee or the policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

Tasks:

The CMSS Working Group was given the directive to:

- Prioritize major issues related to progress & completion measures
- Identify areas for potential recommendations

Working Group Members:

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Domain of the Issue:

- Federal data collection instruments (primarily focused on IPEDS instruments: Graduation Rate Survey, Fall Enrollment Survey, Completions)
- All two-year institutions (public, private, for-profit)

Issues Identified by the Working Group (with Suggested Options for Consideration):

Significant issues with completion rates methodology exist. In examining the domain of literature on these topics, the definitions currently being weighed and adopted by external evaluators, and the recent NPEC focused study on "Suggestions for Improving the IPEDS GRS", some common themes and recommendations have come up and are worthy of discussion. Below are listed the areas deemed as priority areas, along with potential recommendations.

- **Graduation Rate Survey (GRS): Defining first-time.** This is generally clear from the instructions (student should be first-time to higher education), but needs clarity in practice (how long of a stop-out should be valid, use of Nat'l Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to determine first-time freshman (FTF) status).

  While there seems to be little issue with the current definition of "first-time anywhere in higher education", there is ambiguity and an uneven playing field about how this is captured and derived. Generally speaking, matching your first-time cohort locally with the NSC to find prior enrollments elsewhere allows for the greatest ability to eliminate non-first-time students. Local campuses that do not do this NSC match are at a great disadvantage. State systems that have the capability to cross-check enrollments system-wide are advantaged.
    o *Potential Suggestions:*
        - *Promulgate a best practice of performing a NSC match to eliminate prior enrolled students (could the Feds contract with NSC on behalf of all institutions for this service? Could AACC?)*
        - *Change the definition of first-time to "first-time at your institution only" (however, how do you then consider transfers-in?)*
        - *Place a "stop-out" limit time period on "first-time" status (meaning the student can be counted as first-time at your institution if he/she has not been enrolled anywhere for X number of years—3? 5? 10?)*

- **GRS: Defining start term.** For most "traditional" calendar institutions (semesters/quarters), one uses a Fall starting term. Should/could this be expanded to a full-year cohort of FTF students, or is a Fall start term an adequate sample to work from to calculate rates? Making a full-year window the start point might add complexity (multiple end points for tracking), but might also add the entire universe of students to the rates (thus helping solve one of the perceived issues surrounding how not all students are included in GRS rates) .

  If a full-year cohort is used, it certainly adds to the total percentage of students tracked, but complicates either the multiple end points or the "normal time to completion" determination.
    o *Potential Suggestions:*
        - *Conduct a study of representative institutions to see if there are significant differences between Fall term starters and starters in other terms, whether in student demographic or in outcomes. If differences are negligible, it is possible to conclude that a Fall term cohort is a representative sample, and thus viable to continue to use.*
        - *Include all terms in a year, and track each start term to its respective normal time to completion. This adds inclusion and precision, but also institutional burden.*

- *Include all terms in a year, but keep a single end point (for instance, all students that began in academic year 2000-01 will be tracked through June 30, 200X.) This keeps institutional burden minimal, but will commingle normal times to completion (Fall starters will have one extra term to achieve outcomes.)*

- **GRS: defining degree-seeking.** This is a huge issue in GRS calculations for two-year institutions with multiple missions. To a certain extent, being full-time in a Fall term has become the "default" definition of "degree-seeking" (because the GRS only looks at full-time starting cohorts). The current definition in GRS states that a student just needs to be enrolled in courses creditable towards a degree, but this can also include a lot of recreational students and courses (such as PE, which is both degree-applicable and transferrable). Should the GRS be modified to include part-time students, clearly delineating a common definition of "degree-/certificate-/transfer-seeking" will be paramount.
    - *Potential Suggestions:*
        - *Degree-seeking should be defined as what the student claims he/she has intent to do (self-stated intent). Feds would come up with a uniform coding of this and integrate it into the EF report, and only count in GRS those that self-identified as degree/certificate/transfer seeking.*
        - *Degree-seeking should be identified by the attempt/completion of some unit threshold (commonly 12-18 units) over the course of the tracking period.*
        - *Degree-seeking should be identified behaviorally by "gateway course" attempt, most commonly whether the student ever attempted a collegiate/degree-applicable math or English course, program "gateway" course, or clearly vocational/occupational course that signifies behavioral intent.*

- **GRS: defining cohort to be tracked.** Currently, the GRS only tracks cohorts of first-time, full-time students at 2-year institutions. For most 2-year colleges, this also is only for fall starters. The GRS rates have been criticized for tracking and placing a great public accountability emphasis on a cohort that encompasses only a small portion of an entire incoming class. On the other hand, given that this is such a "refined" cohort, resultant rates are likely to look somewhat inflated (compared to full-year, full-time and part-time cohorts).
    - *Potential Suggestions:*
        - *Include all students, regardless of units attempted in first-term.*
        - *Set a lower units attempted threshold on the starting cohort (such as 6 or more in first term).*
        - *If a full-year cohort is being tracked, set a minimum units attempted threshold of units attempted in the first year.*
        - *Eliminate any designation of full-time/part-time in the cohort as many students move between these statuses during their academic history. Increase the tracking period (below) to accommodate all students' progress.*

- **GRS: Defining the tracking term/period.** Currently, the GRS tracks a cohort to 150% "normal time to completion" (NTC); for most students at 2-year institutions, this equates to a maximum 3-year tracking period. Recently, this was extended to 200% NTC, or 4 years. If the GRS is recommended to change to include part-time students, the tracking period for these slower-progressing students needs to be examined. Furthermore, a students' full-time/part-time enrollment status is not a permanent thing; students frequently move in and out of FT/PT throughout their entire academic history, so the concept of placing students in a fixed FT/PT "bucket" based solely upon their enrollment pattern of their very first term is flawed.
  - *Potential Suggestions:*
    - *Lengthen the tracking period to 6 years from cohort inception, especially if the cohort is defined as anything less than a first-time, full-time in Fall cohort.*
    - *Add to the GRS the tracking of multiple cohorts: 3, 6 and 10 years (each GRS report will have 3 cohorts reported on.)*

- **GRS: Outcomes hierarchy.** The GRS has been criticized for its adherence to the outcomes hierarchy more aligned with the mission of 4-year institutions insofar as degrees are given top value, and transfers are subordinate (the counting methodology forces colleges to count degrees awarded first, then transfers only for non-degree recipients.) In many states, transfers are at least equal in value to degrees in outcome. The GRS also allows lateral transfers (transfers form a 2-yr college to another 2-yr or lower college) to be counted with the same weight as an upward transfer (2-yr to 4-yr), which most colleges do not recognize equally. What is needed is a revised outcomes counting hierarchy for those colleges with missions to produce awards and transfers.
  - *Potential Suggestions:*
    - *After removing exemptions, enumerate out separately AA/AS (2-year) degrees, certificates (<2 year), "transfer-prepared" (equivalent to 2-yr degree, fully prepared to transfer), transfers to 4-yr institutions, and "lateral" transfers. From the original cohort, each of these outcomes will have its own separate line of reporting. Like in the Awards submission, students earning multiples of these will be counted separately in each.*
    - *Create one single grouping for "higher-order" outcomes: "earned AA/AS OR Certificate OR transfer-prepared OR transferred to a 4-yr institution" whereby a student earning any of these is counted, but only counted once. Eliminate separate "grad rate" and "transfer rate" calculations. Call this single calculation "Achievement Rate".*
    - *Create a separate grouping for "lower order" outcomes: "lateral transfer, still enrolled".*

- **Crosstabs identified for reporting.** With grad/transfer rates being very highly scrutinized nationally, many desired "cuts" of these rates have been requested. To expand upon the current gender/ethnicity cuts, other crosstabs of these rates include financial aid status (Pell),

FT/PT status, remedial/collegiate status, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, student age group upon entry, and distance education program status.

Currently, the GRS cuts rates by gender and ethnicity. Adding more is possible, but needs to be weighed by form limitation and institutional burden. Also, would each crosstab be reported as a singular crosstab, or would all be crosstabbed (so you could get a rate for Hispanic female 35-40 year olds on financial aid)? The latter will possibly create the need for more unitary level reporting and also might have many more blank or suppressed cells.

- o *Potential Suggestions:*
    - ▪ *Add age group to gender/ethnicity (broadly, so as to not create too many cells): <24/25+ (basically young/old) or <20, 21-39, 40+ (or some other broad grouping) OR just add age group (in detail) as a separate reporting (not crosstabbed with race/eth).*
    - ▪ *Remedial Status: separates cohort and all outcome rates into two categories: those that needed remediation, and those that did not.*
    - ▪ *Financial Aid status: Pell/No Pell, or other locally defined "need based" financial aid*
    - ▪ *Socioeconomic status: locally defined, or first generation status (not likely to be collected everywhere, and would require Federal mandate)*

IPEDS Reporting: Intermediate Measures of Progress. The only true "intermediate" measure of student progress outside of the current outcomes listed in the GRS is the Retention Rate metric in the Fall Enrollment Survey (EF). There is a great deal of national movement currently that seeks to view student progress in two-year institutions in terms of "momentum points", many of which are measures of intermediate progress. Some of these might include:

- o *Potential Suggestions:*
    - ▪ *Retained until end of first term enrolled*
    - ▪ *Unit threshold achievement: completed 12, 30 or some other level of units*
    - ▪ *Completed remedial thresholds (completed sequence)*
    - ▪ *Wage outcomes studies or employment studies*

IPEDS Reporting: Institutional comparisons + peer grouping. With grad/transfer rates being highly scrutinized nationally, institutional comparisons for accountability and other purposes always ensue. In general, grad/transfer rates tend to have a high correlation with exogenous factors out of the campus' control (such as the academic preparedness of the student body and the socioeconomic/ first-gen status of the student body/surrounding service area). To ensure proper comparisons, these exogenous factors need to be weighed and used to create peer groups (which currently use size, urban/rural location status and ethnicity distributions as very rough proxies.)

o   *Potential Suggestions:*

▪   *In the EF report, collect a headcount by student zip code and use this as the basis for creating service area indices for each campus (crossed with census data to look at service area socioeconomic status, first-gen status, and other factors) to create peer groups. This would also allow for a more granular study of participation rates.*